

Drought in California prompts some to rethink lawns as landscaping norm

By Hudson Sangree, The Sacramento Bee

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An entire block of homes has lush green grass lawns in El Dorado Hills, Calif., as seen March 27, 2014.

SACRAMENTO, Calif.—Sacramento gets about as much annual rainfall as arid Flagstaff, Ariz., but its lush lawns are modeled on those of rain-soaked England.

The capital's turf tradition is deeply rooted and is even enshrined in the bylaws of various homeowners associations. That may be starting to change, however. Nudged by local governments worried about water shortages, home builders and homeowners associations are showing increased willingness to embrace the drought-tolerant landscapes that more naturally suit California.

A growing number of cities are paying homeowners to tear out their lawns. A few home builders are starting to plan development in a way that they say makes more sense for the region's Mediterranean climate and regular droughts.

"We're on the cusp of change. It's definitely here," said Kevin Carson, Northern California president for The New Home Co.

The developer is building the first major subdivision in decades in the slow-growth university town of Davis, Calif. The Cannery project will feature drought-tolerant landscaping along its bike paths, and most of the front yards will be landscaped with low-water plants in place of grass.

City officials in Davis insisted on the plan. The New Home Company embraced it by hiring a prominent firm of landscape architects that specialize in low-water designs. They're planning gardens of lavender, California wild roses and bottle brush instead of flat swaths of green, Carson said.

A big unknown is whether buyers will want homes without lawns, a mainstay in the Sacramento region for 150 years. Carson and others said it's a matter of showing homeowners the beauty and benefits of drought-tolerant landscaping, while counting on preferences to evolve as the public becomes aware of the need for water conservation.

"Consumers' tastes do have to change, but we have to give them some different opportunities," Carson said.

Today, there's basically one way most people think of to landscape a house: a lawn surrounded by shrubs and flowers with a shade tree or two. It's known as the English garden, and it's nearly universal now. But that wasn't always the case, experts said.

The model took hold in the second half of the 19th century, when seed companies sold the idea from Maine to California, said Thomas J. Mickey, author of "America's Romance with the English Garden."

"Nurseries and seed companies had a huge influence on California landscapes," Mickey said.

Advances in printing allowed for colorful seed catalogs, brought to California by railroad. Salesmen traveled west promoting the new yard plans, he said.

Transplants from the East Coast also brought their notions of landscaping with them to the West. The emerging middle class wanted lawns like the American aristocracy and the English gentry before them. Think of the vast lawns surrounding the grand manor house in "Downton Abbey," he said.

Well-groomed lawns in the front yards of homes became status symbols and statements about the residents who lived there.

"In America, the lawn was linked to social class," Mickey said. "It really took off when people had the money to move to the suburbs. Real estate agents would say, Now you can have a lawn."

The federal government, too, promoted lawns to homeowners. In its yearbook from 1897, the U.S. Department of Agriculture recommended Kentucky bluegrass and described the ideal turf.

"A perfect lawn consists of the growth of a single variety of grass with a smooth, even surface, uniform color, and an elastic turf which has become, through constant care, so fine and so close in texture as to exclude weeds, which, appearing, should be at once removed," wrote Frank Lamson-Scribner, first head of the USDA's division of agrostology, which studied grasses.

Suburban homeowners after World War II took the advice to heart, competing to have the perfect lawn. Homeowners today spend tens of billions of dollars planting and keeping up their lawns.

Lawns met with some disfavor in the drought of the late 1970s, when a small minority of homeowners let their grass die and filled their yards with gravel in a landscape more common to Phoenix or Albuquerque. But the notion never caught on in Sacramento in a big way. Other homeowners planted vegetable gardens and fruit trees, opting to make their yards productive instead of ornamental.

By and large, though, the lawn and a border of shrubbery remained the dominant model.

In last decade's housing boom, home builders rolled out sod by the truckload in front of tens of thousands of new homes. Most homeowners associations continue to insist that those lawns be maintained, even as the drought became a crisis this year and cities across the region, including Folsom and Sacramento, required homeowners to cut water consumption by 20 percent or more.

"Lawns are pretty," said Tom Gohring, executive director of the Water Forum, a group that promotes water conservation across the Sacramento region, with a particular eye to the health of the American River. He said even though he and his wife replanted their backyard in drought-tolerant native species, they couldn't let go of the grass in their front yard.

Many homeowners feel the same. But with tight water supplies, tastes need to start changing, Gohring said. What's needed is a "paradigm shift" in the way builders, homeowners and homeowners associations view yards and home landscaping, he said. It won't happen fast but the drought has at least jump-started the shift.

"We're in the middle of a movement, but it does take time," Gohring said.

Cities, state lawmakers, and homeowners are exploring alternatives that, should they take hold, could transform the Sacramento area's front yards in years to come and reduce water usage.

In early March, the Sacramento City Council approved a "cash for grass" program that provides rebates to homeowners who replace their grass lawns with drought-tolerant landscaping. Utilities officials said they had a waiting list for the program before the spending plan was even approved.

Roseville, Calif., one of the leaders in water-conservation programs in the region, launched a cash-for-grass program in 2008 with a budget of \$30,000. City officials weren't sure how it would be received, said Lisa Brown, the city's water-conservation administrator. They needn't have worried.

"We had a line outside the door the morning we started. We had expended all of our funding in five minutes," Brown said. "We had a budget of \$100,000 this fiscal year, and that's already gone. We've got a hefty waiting list."

The program pays \$1 a square foot to homeowners to replace irrigated turf with drought-tolerant plants, up to \$1,000 per household.

A 1,500-square-foot lawn surrounded by 375 feet of plants that require medium amounts of water uses requires 45,653 gallons per year, Brown estimated. The same size area planted in drought-tolerant landscaping needs only 12,338 gallons of water a year, she said.

Since the program's inception, at least 500 homeowners have removed about 350,000 square feet of turf, saving an estimated 14 million gallons of water annually, Brown said.

Britta Kalinowski was one of the program's early participants. She re-landscaped her then-2-year-old home in west Roseville's Fiddymont Farm subdivision in 2009. Her front yard, once flat turf, is now a mix of rosemary and lavender, periwinkle and crape myrtle, with a variety of height and color.

Instead of mowing once a week she prunes a couple of times a year and sometimes replaces a plant or two, Kalinowski said.

"It's really low maintenance. I'm really happy with it," she said. "It looks more interesting. Some of our neighbors are ripping their hair out because they can't keep their lawns green. They water and they fertilize. I don't have that trouble."

Kalinowski said her neighbors mainly have been curious about her yard, not critical, and some have emulated her example.

In other new home communities, where homeowners association rules govern lawn maintenance, residents seeking to redo their yards have had to submit formal landscaping plans to HOA boards, but most homeowners were ultimately allowed to convert their yards, Brown said.

"It's controversial," said Kelvin Nanney, the executive director of the California North Chapter of the Community Associations Institute, which represents HOAs. Dozens of associations across the Sacramento region each have their own rules, he said. Some are more amenable to drought-tolerant yards than others.

"It depends on the association," he said. "Everybody is trying to do the right thing."

Two state lawmakers introduced bills this year to make it easier for homeowners to switch to low-water landscaping, HOA rules notwithstanding.

State law already forbids HOA rules that prohibit, or have the effect of prohibiting, the use of low-water plants. But some associations have found ways to prevent homeowners from re-landscaping too much, for instance by requiring homeowners to maintain a certain portion of their yards as lawns, said Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez, D-San Diego.

This year Gonzalez introduced Assembly Bill 2104 to broaden the existing law, Civil Code section 4735, and make it clear an HOA shouldn't stand in the way of homeowners who want to swap turf for low-water plants.

"We just want to take the first step in allowing homeowners to change out their lawns," Gonzalez said. Forcing homeowners to irrigate to maintain green grass in a drought "makes no sense," she said.

State Sen. Jim Nielsen, a Republican who represents a vast district that stretches from the Placer County suburbs to the Oregon border, has introduced a bill to prohibit HOAs from fining homeowners for underwatering their lawns when the governor declares a drought-related state of emergency, as Gov. Jerry Brown did in January.

Homeowners caught in that bind could face a "double whammy" of being required to cut water use by their water provider or face fines, while also being fined by their HOA for letting their lawns go brown, Nielsen said.

Cheryl Buckwalter, is president of EcoLandscape California, a group that advocates drought-resistant landscapes. The group published four different plans for homeowners, complete with lists of low-water plants, at its website, www.ecolandscape.org/new-ca.

Planting new drought-tolerant yards takes money, but the up-front costs are mitigated by the long-term savings in water and maintenance, she contended.

She cited a project called "garden/garden" by the city of Santa Monica, Calif. The city landscaped two adjacent bungalows, one with a traditional lawn and another with native plantings. The experiment, detailed on the city's website, proved cost-effective long term. The low-water option cost more to install—\$16,700 for the native yard versus \$12,400 for the traditional one. But it saved more than 50,000 gallons of water annually, greatly reduced maintenance time and costs, and eliminated hundreds of pounds of yard waste each year.

What makes sense, Buckwalter said, is for home builders and HOAs to pursue drought-tolerant landscaping on a large scale, rather than having homeowners do it piecemeal. She said she's hoping to educate those groups and pursue widespread change in the way the Sacramento region is landscaped.

"HOAs and builders are positioned to be the stars and true leaders here," Buckwalter said. "They have an opportunity to set the example and offer leadership to our residents."